

Thinking About China's Navy

The United States is headed for a naval war with China. We are going to lose. The combination of inadequate shipbuilding and procurement of the wrong types of ships sets us up to be run out of the Western Pacific in five to ten years.

Of all of the shortsighted defense procurement decisions a government can make, the failure to fund steady, balanced shipbuilding is the worst of all. Feast and famine is the most expensive way to build ships.

Unless it is a long, drawn-out affair—unlikely for a war at sea today—nations fight naval wars with what they have at the start. Reservists and the National Guard can beef up Army units and, to a lesser extent, the Air Force, but it takes forever to build, man, and train a ship into a fighting unit.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his McNamara-style whiz kids would like us to believe fundamental changes obviate the need for an adequate force structure. They soothe us that the revolution in military affairs offers complete knowledge of the battle space, and that this all-knowing perspective, combined with precision weapons, can provide the same combat power with fewer assets.

The concept works against Afghanistan or Iraq, but it won't against a competitor in our league. The first thing a technologically sophisticated adversary with access to space—China, Europe, or India—will do is cut the cord on many of our high-tech command, control, and intelligence gadgets and we will be left with too few ships.

The Pentagon civilians say they are preparing for the next war. In fact, they are getting ready to fight the last one. There may be a few more Iraqs in our future but the next major challenge is a maritime war across the Pacific that will require large, sustainable, adequately manned, blue-water ships. Inshore concepts like the Littoral Combat Ship are a waste of money for that kind of war. We need to push up CV-21, build DD(X)s in respectable numbers, and launch a lot more nuclear-powered submarines. Some projections show our submarine fleet shrinking to 30 ships, about one-third of what is needed.

We have been here before. The parallels between the United States and Japan in 1931 and the United States and China today are chilling. Now, as then, professional naval officers on both sides know their nations' interests will clash. As in 1931, one nation is building a navy adequate to the task while the other has its head in the sand.

It is difficult to play shipbuilding catch-up after a war starts. The United States went on a binge just before hostilities with Japan commenced, but fought the first two years of the war with the seven fleet carriers built in the 1920s and 1930s plus the USS *Essex* (CV-9) and the second *Yorktown* (CV-10).

Japan, on the other hand, started the war with a superb navy. Only our ability to read their code and bad decisions by Japanese naval leaders averted disaster.

Of course, the Washington Naval Treaty had restricted tonnage, which caused the Navy to design and build the smaller *Wasp* (CV-7) prior to the Treaty's expiration in 1938. The *Hornet* (CV-8) subsequently was

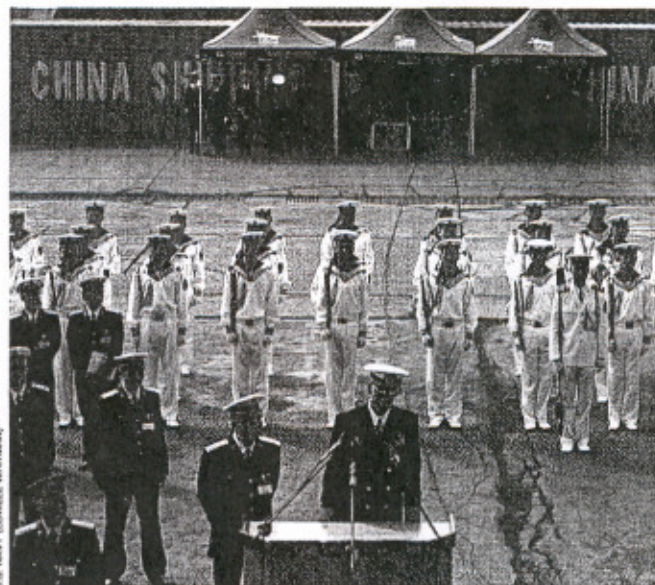
built to the earlier *Yorktown* design and commissioned in October 1941, just prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Consider how history might have changed if the U.S. Fleet had been able to build and deploy four or five more *Yorktown* (CV-5)-class carriers by the start of the war. Japan could have been managed diplomatically or defeated quickly, and more resources devoted to the war in Europe, which might have ended much sooner—possibly averting the Cold War.

On the other side of the line, Germany had only 57 U-boats in service including just thirty 500-/750-ton boats. Even with such meager forces, the *Kriegsmarine* missed starving Britain into

submission by only the narrowest of margins. Germany would have prevailed had it started with a fraction of the 781 U-boats later sunk by the Allies.

Going back even farther, imagine how entertaining the Royal Navy would have found America in 1812 had we fielded 15 or 20 44-gun ships instead of three.

It isn't too late, but it is close. Building only six ships in Fiscal Year 2006 and dropping below a fleet total of 300 ships is a recipe for disaster. China will not be that parsimonious. If we fail to act, it will overtake us in naval power as early as 2010. A realistic sustained effort today can make all the difference.



Against a backdrop of Chinese sailors from a growing Navy, Captain J. Stephen Maynard, skipper of the USS *Blue Ridge* (LCC-19), took questions from the local media in Zhanjiang, China, late in March. Port visits are important, but so is a substantial fleet.

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